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BEWARE OF FACEBOOK "LIKE-FARMING"

Steve Weisman, a professor at Bentley University in Waltham, Massachusetts, posted a scam alert at www.Bankrate.com on February 15, 2016, about the innocent Facebook act of clicking "like" on pictures of our children and grandchildren, among many other postings that we "like." It seems that this innocent act, according to Mr. Weisman, may be aiding Facebook "Like-Farmers."

Generally when we think about farming, it evokes pastoral country images. However, farming takes on a whole different meaning when it comes to Facebook.

We have all seen Facebook posts urging us to share that post or click that we "Like" something. Sometimes there is an emotional appeal to show support for a sick child or a certain political candidate. Other posts might offer free coupons, a contest or lottery from companies with which you do business.

While some of these posts are legitimate, many are not. Posts are frequently written to take advantage of Facebook's algorithms that value the popularity measured by "Likes" and "Shares," which then cause the postings to appear on the Facebook pages of more people. This is known as "Like-Farming."

Although the original content "Liked" or "Shared" may appear sincere or entertaining, the scammers who use this technique are able to change the content after it has been shared to something entirely different from what was originally "Shared" or "Liked." This switch can be done in order to send advertising for which the person originating the posting gets paid based on the number of people receiving the advertising.

At its worst, however, it can be used to trick users into installing malware on their computer or for phishing---a scam to get you to give personal information---to make you a victim of identity theft.

In one "Like-Farming" scam circulated recently, a Facebook account made to look like it was run by Southwest Airlines (which the scammers misspell as South West Air) offered free first-class tickets to anywhere in the world along with \$5,000 spending money to the winners of a contest. To be eligible for the prize, consumers had to "Like" and "Share" the Facebook post. (By the way, savvy travelers will know that Southwest Airlines does not have first-class seating.)

What happens next?

The great myth-debunking website www.snopes.com has the answer:

the IG

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"Those who follow such instructions are then led into a set of pages prompting them to input a fair amount of personal information (including name, age, address, and phone numbers), complete a lengthy series of surveys, and finally sign up (and commit to paying) for at least two "Reward Offers" (e.g., Netflix subscriptions, credit report monitoring services, prepaid credit cards)."

So what should you do?

Posts that promise a prize for "Sharing" or "Liking" are often scams. If you think a company offering a contest might be legitimate, you should go to the company's website to find out if the company is indeed running a contest.

As for the other types of posts that appeal to you to "Share" or "Like" them, you should be a bit more skeptical before automatically "Sharing" or "Liking" a post.

A 2007 photo of a seven-year-old Pennsylvania girl with Stage IV cancer posing in her cheerleading uniform has been used numerous times for Facebook "**Like-Farming**." Today that girl is a cancer-free teenager whose family is understandably outraged that their daughter's photograph has been abused by scammers through Facebook "**Like-Farming**."



For more information or to file to a complaint, contact Pinellas County Consumer Protection at (727) 464-6200 or visit www.pinellascounty.org/consumer.